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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5240
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2605
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TAGS: PREL PGOV SAARC IN IR NP

SUBJECT: MFA COMMENTS ON IRAN'S STATUS AS SAARC OBSERVER

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

How Iran Became an Observer

¶1. (C) On April 12, Arjun Bahadur Thapa, the Joint Secretary for the Foreign Ministry's South Asia and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Division, stated to Emboff that Iran had sent a note to the Prime Minister of India and the SAARC Secretary General expressing its interest in becoming an observer over six months ago. As a matter of protocol, Thapa stated, Iran's expression of interest was circulated among the SAARC members and was then raised during the "informal" meetings of the program committee that preceded the recent SAARC summit in New Delhi. The program committee had in turn referred the matter to the standing committee. Thapa explained that the standing committee was made up of the Foreign Secretaries from each of the SAARC members. Upon recommendation of the standing committee, the matter was referred to the Council of Ministers at their formal summit meeting in New Delhi. No objections were received, so a declaration was drafted granting Iran observer status.

Observer to Member?

¶2. (C) When asked about the criteria for SAARC observer status versus membership status, Thapa noted that, to date, SAARC had not rejected any country's request for observer status. Membership, on the other hand, was only open to countries in the region that subscribed to the principles of SAARC and were willing to undertake the responsibilities that accompanied membership. Thapa did not believe that Iran was part of South Asia, clearly suggesting that Iranian membership was not contemplated. At a separate meeting at the Foreign Ministry, Joint Secretary for the UN and International Organizations, Dinesh Bhattarai, gave Emboff the same response regarding the potential of Iranian membership. In response to Emboff's concern about the effect of Iranian participation on SAARC, Thapa claimed that all bilateral and contentious issues were expressly excluded from the discussion within the regional organization.

Comment

¶3. (C) At least in the middle ranks in Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs there is little evidence of concern about Iran's new status as a SAARC observer. The Nepalis were encouraged by the global attention the issue received, but downplayed the significance of Iran's observer status. What mattered to them, and they implied what should matter us, was India's relationship with its neighbors and growing economic cooperation among SAARC members.

MORIARTY